

A Kerma Ancien Cemetery in the Northern Dongola Reach: Excavations at site H29

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2018. The Sudan Archaeological Research Society and Archaeopress.

Pbk 242 pp. 1

ISBN: 9781784919313

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This publication details the results of excavation at site H29, a Kerma Ancien cemetery in the Northern Dongola Reach. It is an extremely comprehensive volume that is well illustrated and provides clear supporting figures and appendices for all types of finds. Cemetery H29 offers evidence that fills in both a geographical and chronological gap, as it is located at the upstream (southern) end of the Hawawiya Nile and was active during the less well-attested Kerma Ancien Period. Any information about the lives of Kermans outside of the capital of Kerma has enormous research potential to give new perspectives on the development of this early state. Questions of social and religious cohesion, especially in this formative stage of the Kerma Kingdom, can only be answered through a thorough investigation of peripheral Kerman communities. This volume from Welsby and the SARS team sets a high standard of scholarship and publication for any future work in this key geographical and chronological area.

The introduction presents the importance of site H29 within the Northern Dongola Reach Survey Concession of the Sudan Archaeological Research Society (SARS). The initial results of this

massive survey undertaking provided invaluable evidence of the phasing of ancient occupation along branching palaeochannels to the east of the Nile. Through identifying settlement, occupation scatter, and cemetery sites and identifying their periods of activity through surface observations and targeted excavation, the SARS survey reconstructed the locations of the Alfreda, Hawawiya, and Selim Nile palaeochannels. The complex surface water features of this stretch of the Nile Valley, which also includes the seasonally wet Seleim Basin, provided an environment that could support a notably dense system of settlements from the Neolithic through Kerma Classique periods. As determined by the SARS survey, the evidence of occupation in these eastern palaeochannels mostly disappears by the beginning of the New Kingdom, although limited sites may have been active into the early Kushite Period. This publication highlights the immense research potential held by previously unexcavated sites in this prolific region of the Nile.

Detailed descriptions of each of the 99 graves excavated by the SARS team between December 2011 and February 2012 are provided in Chapter Two. The publication offers a thorough description of each grave, supported by plan and profile drawings in addition to providing coloured photographs of notable elements or finds. The list of finds and object typologies is internally consistent and refers to additional information in each of the subsequent chapters. As with many Kerma sites, the organic preservation was notable and remains of red ochre stained hides were recovered.

The ceramics finds are compiled in Chapter Three by Isabella Welsby Sjöström. This chapter provides a comprehensive presentation of the forms, fabric types, and decoration styles of the Kerma Ancien, C-Group, and imported ceramics from the cemetery. The data are laid out clearly in the body of the chapter and in an accompanying table, which importantly also includes a concordance between alternate numbering systems making future research accessible to other scholars. Welsby Sjöström notes that within the diversity of geometric decorations, which may reference basketwork, there is a significant replication of patterns within the Mahas and Dongola

Reach regions, suggesting communication or centralization among potters during this period.

Chapter Four, ‘The Small Finds’ (Derek A. Welsby), presents artefacts first by material and then by type, alongside supporting line illustrations and colour photographs. The preserved material represents a cohesive range of object types known from the Kerma Ancien period, such as beads of faience, stone, eggshell and shell, bone bracelets and labrets, lithics, and rocker stamps, but excluding shell hair slides as noted by Welsby. Particularly notable finds include a travertine jar rim, of an Egyptian Old Kingdom type found also in a deposit near the Western Defuffa at the City of Kerma, and stone stelae with nicely preserved painted geometric decoration.

The faunal and human skeletal evidence is presented next and provides complimentary lines of evidence. Chapter Five, ‘Animal Deposits’ (Pernille Bangsgaard), discusses the unfortunately poorly preserved faunal material recovered from the cemetery. Deposits of birds, equids, cattle, and sheep may represent funerary feasts or meals left for the dead, which is not well attested from other sites. Red pigment preserved on two cattle nasal bones provides interesting potential connections with Pan Grave practices. Chapter Six, ‘The Physical Anthropology’ (Rebecca Whiting), provides an important new dataset to the ongoing developments in Nubian bioarchaeology, despite some limitations due to looting disturbance at the site. The presentation of the osteological data is extremely precise and comprehensive, including a thorough discussion of age-at-death, adult sex distribution, preservation, biological variation in non-metric traits, metrics including stature, and palaeopathology. The only criticism is the lack of data points numbered on the bar charts in this chapter, while the numerical percentages may be available in table form elsewhere, this concordance in many cases was not immediately discernible by this reader. Whiting suggests that the presence of more than one individual in some graves could be an interesting example of early human sacrifice, but their final interpretation that these are individuals displaced by looting is much more likely. Whiting also suggests that future research is necessary to determine if subtle

differences in the prevalence of vertebral pathologies between males and females does demonstrate different types of labour performed by individuals. Abnormal dental wear in five individuals also will benefit from additional study and new comparative samples, as grooving may have been the result of dental hygiene or manual tasks that involve holding material with the teeth. Especially in combination with the material finds, this osteological data from H29 provides a wealth of evidence that will be instrumental in further research in the earlier periods of Kerma.

Chapter Seven, 'Plants as Grave Goods' (Phillipa Ryan), and Chapter Eight, 'Charcoal and Wood' (Caroline Cartwright), offer insights into the environment and diet of this Kerma Ancien community. The deposits of phytoliths on top of several individuals provide a new insight into the utilization of wild grasses, as well as highlighting the wetter environmental conditions during this time period. Additionally, the identification of five indigenous tree species from charcoal and wood samples provides further evidence about the consistent surface water source near to the Nile palaeochannel. In both chapters, clear illustrations will prove to be useful comparanda for future research.

Finally, Chapter Nine synthesizes the depth of information presented above into a comprehensive discussion that comes together to offer a clear picture of funerary practices of this Kerma Ancien community. The tightly clustered tumuli of similar sizes, with relatively equally distributed funerary equipment assemblages, bolsters the understanding of Kerma Ancien as a period of emerging complexity and a precursor to the later developments of social hierarchies in the Kerma Moyen and Classique periods. The skill seen in the decoration of pottery and personal adornments demonstrates the foundations of Kerman artistry. Importantly, an Arabic summary is offered at the end of the publication, although it is short in length it serves to include Sudanese (and other Arabic-speaking) researchers. Overall, this excavation makes great strides in adding to understandings of a time period that suffers both from few known sites and often poor preservation. The depth of information offered by the documentation

of the H29 cemetery points to the great potential of further exploration of the Northern Dongola Reach.